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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000002

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON DEMOCRACY - AN INSIDER'S  
PERSPECTIVE

REF: A. 2008 NOUAKCHOTT 775

[1](#)B. 2008 NOUAKCHOTT 601

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The respected moderator of the National Dialogue on Democracy (Etats Generaux de la Democratie) sees the process as the best chance to get out of an untenable situation. The 'pragmatists' in the process are looking to establish a framework that will get democracy back on track even though via a detour that essentially accepts the coup as a fait accompli and gives up on Abdallahi's presidency. Some see signs that the majority of the military want to extricate themselves from their political dead end -- perhaps via a new "understanding" with Ould Daddah. Anti-coup elements within the Dialogue hope it will serve as a basis for discussion between President Abdallahi and all political parties rather than a roadmap leading towards elections. End Summary

[1](#)2. (C) An Old Friend of the Embassy: Charge met January 2 with the overall moderator of the Dialogue Cheikh Saad Bouh Camara at Camara's home. As moderator, Camara is responsible for the mechanics of the Dialogue and coordination of the various working groups. Camara is well known to the Mission having previously headed the National Electoral Commission and as one of the members of the Contact Group that had attempted (unsuccessfully) to mediate between Abdallahi and Aziz in October (REFTEL B). Camara is well respected in Mauritania and in the region (prior to the coup, we had worked with Embassy Tunis to set up a video conference with Camara for Tunisian political parties and civil society to learn about the "Mauritanian Model" as a template for Tunisian democratization." While Camara had been reluctant to come to the Embassy while the Dialogue is open or be seen in public with the Charge, he has welcomed the chance to essentially "explain himself." A senior FSN, who had studied under Camara and views him as a "mentor" noted that Camara is getting flooded with questions from old students asking "why did you do it?" Camara said he had been offered the Presidency of the Dialogue but had said he would only accept if Abdallahi was fully released and given complete freedom of movement and communication and if the Dialogue was delayed until Abdallahi had been out awhile. In the end, Abdallahi Ould Cheikh, was given the leadership of the Dialogue.

[1](#)3. (C) Better to be heard than be ignored: Camara termed his

participation in the Dialogue much as he had termed his participation in the earlier Contact Group -- an effort to get democracy back on track given the realities of the military's current effective control of power. He noted that the earlier Contact Group effort had petered out because they couldn't generate interest in the political parties (particularly Abdallahi's FNDD) to begin a dialogue. Camara approaches the Dialogue saying "the majority of the participants believe the coup was wrong" and, in his own case, adding, "the FNDD position is 'correct' and they have done a great service in opposing the coup." That said, the military still has control so the FNDD's "correctness" becomes somewhat secondary -- there is still a need for a political resolution that, if it is to be peaceful, recognizes the military must be prepared to yield power. Camara does not see a peaceful solution that includes Abdallahi's return so he is looking for the next best thing. Camara added he was impressed with the structure set up for the Dialogue comparing it in some ways to the discussions immediately after independence -- a real discussion of what type of democracy Mauritania needs for its own reality. While acknowledging that the Dialogue leaves no room for a serious discussion of Abdallahi's return (particularly since the FNDD is boycotting), Camara saw a broad range of views being raised inside the Hall. He saw the chance for those who oppose the coup to voice an agenda that would get the military out while firming up aspects of the political process to avoid future political gridlock -- and future military coups. Without his presence, and that of parties such as Ould Daddah's RFD, there would have been no

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alternative voices raised. When asked to what degree the process was subject to auto-censorship, Camara said there were plenty of delegates being critical of the junta but in a Mauritanian indirect approach "le non-dit."

14. (C) Just a coronation? Charge told Camara the U.S. sees little chance of a credible outcome from a Dialogue organized by General Aziz and his cronies. Camara recognized the skepticism but said he had met with enough military to believe that many of the High State Council were looking for a way out. "They are trained as military -- to deal with the fight against terrorism or drugs. They aren't trained or capable of handling politics and economics and most of them recognize that." Camara was told "Aziz has not decided whether he wants to stay on or not," giving him some optimism that the right political framework might get the military to withdraw. Camara insisted the Dialogue was starting from a clean sheet of paper. He acknowledged some confusion at the beginning of the Dialogue because delegates were expecting some type of discussion framework but instead got "a piece of paper with a title, and nothing else." Camara said he and others had insisted, and appear to have succeeded, in creating the Dialogue to create a conclusion that doesn't just present one position as "the consensus view" but gives due credit and credibility to dissenting opinions. Camara said the biggest difficulty was trying to keep "a bunch of nomads" on topic -- noting delegates would go from one working group to another rather than where they were assigned, that they would raise issues not germane to their topic, and (always a problem here) they couldn't respect time limits on remarks. Camara said the Dialogue leadership was working hard to keep the discussion focused on a solution to the current problem by trying to avoid questions of constitutional revision prior to new elections (although there will be recommendations for revisions for some future President), or political statements (for instance holding the line on no statements about Gaza or calls to severe relations).

15. (C) A basis for discussion, not a decision: Camara said that despite Aziz's pledge to "abide by the decisions or recommendations of the Dialogue," he did not see the Dialogue producing a binding document. Camara recognized that the Dialogue has no constitutional authority so, in effect, it is

mainly an extended discussion to find a common roadmap. Camara thought the final declaration would try to be specific on some key points such as the length of the transition, the mechanisms for governance during the transition, and the mechanics of election preparation and monitoring but the declaration itself would not be binding. Camara hoped the recommendations would provide a viable enough political plan that the FNDD might be able to use them as a basis for discussion with other parties. He looked to the recent FNDD participation in a televised debate on the political crisis as a sign that they would not reject all discussion out of hand. Looking particularly at National Assembly President Ould Boulkheir, Camara saw the FNDD as first and foremost opposed to the military. Camara said Ould Boulkheir had told him, "we insist on the return to constitutional order, but we are not married to Sidi." Camara hoped the U.S. would encourage the FNDD to engage in such a political dialogue rather than allow the crisis to continue and deepen. Camara suggested that those, like himself, who have respected the principled U.S. approach would change their view if the U.S. rejected out of hand a plan that might offer a real chance at democracy without violence. Perveresely, he added that if the U.S. was seen as ultimately unwilling to support something reasonable, he and others would want to see us punished, "by recommending we cut ties with Israel."

16. (C) President Ould Daddah? Charge asked Camara whether he believed that after the Dialogue Aziz would present himself as a presidential candidate and win. Camara said he didn't think so noting that strangely, Aziz seemed more concerned about blocking Vall than promoting his own position. Camara thought the behind-the-scenes negotiation was between Aziz and Ahmed Ould Daddah that would lead to an

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Ould Daddah presidency, with Aziz' ongoing influence and security being enshrined in a National Security Council he would head. Camara thought the FNDD feared new elections no so much on the grounds of principle (i.e. because they insist on Abdallahi's rightful return) but because they doubt they could maintain their unity and field a winning candidate. Camara did see Ould Boulkheir as probably the most willing to participate in new elections and probably the most likely to be able to challenge Ould Daddah. Camara was clearly willing to accept Ould Daddah as President even if that required "an arrangement" with the military.

17. (C) Comment: In this meeting as in past meetings, Camara comes across as someone sincerely looking for the best resolution to a bad situation. He views himself a pragmatic who doesn't see the utility in fighting battles he sees no chance of winning (like getting Aziz out and Abdallahi back in). He says, "most of those who say they support the coup don't and hope they can find a better way out." For Camara and others, getting democracy back on track may mean a rather lengthy detour that requires another 5 years or more of giving the military some special role and hoping the next President will better control the men in uniform than the last one. Another week or so will show whether the Dialogue will actually come up with something representing something serious or if, in the end, the paper will be a rubber stamp.  
End Comment  
HANKINS